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AUTHOR Gordon, Edmund W.
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ABSTRACT

The most pressing problems of research on minority groups have not received adequate attention. One such problem is that of identification and understanding of the mechanisms of learning facility and learning dysfunction and the implications of both for the optimum development of heterogeneous populations. Secondly, in contrast to the body of research and statistics concerning intellectual status, little has been done to analyze the qualitative aspects of intellectual function in target populations. A third area of research on plasticity of intellectual development has yet to yield definitive results. Zigler's work on the relationship between quality of intellectual function and affective state may provide insight into the development of cognitive achievement, if pursued. A fourth area of possible research is the implications of population diversity and pluralism for behavioral analysis and assessment. Finally the context in which learning takes place and the purposes served by learning must also be further explored. Ogbu and Wallace have argued, in different ways, that the purposes served by education are determined by the society that sponsors it. (Author/WI)

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PERSPECTIVE ON THE STATUS OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT CONCERNING MINORITY GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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Edmund W. Gordon

Institute for Urban and Minority Education
Educational Testing Service, Princeton
and
Teachers College, Columbia University

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A E R A SYMPOSIUM

The purposes of this Symposium can be summarized in three points:

1. To take stock of where we are and where we need to go,

2. To consider some approaches to minority human resource development and utilization to help us accelerate our movement,

3. To conduct an open forum where we can criticize, stimulate, encourage and support each other.

My discussion of the status of research and development concerning minority groups can take a number of directions. We can celebrate the facts that minority group membership in AERA has increased one hundred-fold in the past twenty years and that we have a host of black and increasing numbers of Chicano, Native American and Puerto Rican brothers and sisters involved in research. From another point of view, we can review the content of some of our contributions to the study of intelligence and its measurement, to the study of aspects of personality and self-concept, to the study of socialization processes, to the study of school learning and school wastage, to the study of early childhood, to the study of language development and linguistic diversity.

A third possible direction for my discussion of the status of research and development concerning minoritites could be to avoid celebration and commendation and embrace self-criticism. It may be that we need to look at and applaud our progress and to call attention to our scholars. But, I sense a more pressing need. In 1975, there are not only more of us; we are better educated; we influence if not control more resources; we are in more influential positions; we have more and better students. In comparison to the climate and conditions in which W.E.B. Du Bois, Franklin Fraizer, Charles Johnson and their contemporaries worked, we have achieved or been granted an exceptional advantage. In comparison to the masses of our sisters and brothers we are a particularly privileged class. (Mind you, I am not claiming that we have it made or

that we are free or that we have achieved equality.) I am suggesting that our position and privileges have been elevated and with that elevation, that enhanced position, those extra privileges -- with them go added or special responsibilities. Chief among those responsiblities are the expectations that we will use the talent and competence and position that we have been enabled to achieve first to improve the plight of our fellow beings and second to increase the chances for the emergence and survival of a more humane society.

Now, when I look at the nature and quality of our individual and collective efforts at research and development concerning minority groups, I am forced to give us a very low rating. This rating is low, not because some of us have failed to work hard, the fact is that some of us work too hard, or, at least, keep too busy. The rating is low because the most pressing problems have not received the necessary attention. One such problem involves identifying and understanding the mechnaisms of learning facility and learning dysfunction, and the implications of both for the optimum development of heterogeneous populations. This problem broadly conceived has received an enormous amount of attention, but our progress in identifying and understanding these mechanisms has been slow.

Research related to this problem has covered a wide variety of approaches and issues. However, most of this work can be classified under two broad categories: the first of these might be called the study of population characteristics, and the second, the description and and superficial evaluation of programs and practices. In the first of these categories, investigators have placed heavy emphasis on the enumeration and description of what are regarded as deficits in the conditions or behavior of the target population - the ways the groups studied differ from an alleged "normal" population. These "deficits" are used to account for the observed dysfunctions in educational performance among the members of those groups.

Studies within this category can be further divided between research into performance and research into life conditions. The largest body of research concerns one type of performance characteristic, intellectual status. Most studies in this area concentrate on IQ testing results, and consistently support the hypothesis that high economic, ethnic or social status is associated with high intellectual status; the reverse also shows consistently - that is, poor children earn lower scores than rich children; lower class children score lower than middle and upper class children; blacks and other minority groups do not do as well as whites. Some of these studies have included some speculative discussion in an attempt to interpret their results. On one extreme, investigators see their work as supporting assumptions concerning genetic determinants of intelligence; at the other end of the spectrum, researchers report their work in a context of support for the prominence of environmental factors in determining intellectual status. A few have continued the long tradition of alleged association between race, genetics, and quality of intellect. However, the largest group now working in the field tends to interpret the data as reflective of a complex interaction between hereditary and environmental forces in the determination of the quality of intellect.

In contrast to the huge body of research and statistics concerning intellectual status, there has been only a limited amount of effort directed at the analysis of qualitative aspects of intellectual function in target populations. Work in this second area included the efforts of some who have tried to factor-analyze standardized tests, and many who have tried to identify differential deficits and strengths in the functioning of minority populations. A landmark in this area is the work of Lesser and associates, who have tried to identify by ethnic groups differential patterns of intellectual function. Their work focuses on the identification of qualitative aspects of intellectual status, as opposed to the more common concern with the examination of intellectual status solely in quantitative terms.

A third area encompassing a considerable body of research deals with plasticity of intellectual development. Building upon Binet's early concern with the trainability of intellect and Montesorri's efforts at modifying intellectual function in children of subnormal performance levels, investigators have worked with mildly or severely retarded children as well as with normal and below-average children. These studies have led to mixed findings, yielding no real definitive conclusion relative to the plasticity of intellect. Some reports show intervention to be associated with modest or no significant change in intelligence test scores. Many of these modest changes have been interpreted as reflecting a normal fluctuation in intellectual function from one test period to another. On the other hand, some studies have shown significant differences in the level of post treatment test scores, but those improvements have not yet been shown in large population studies or over a period of time long enough to justify definitive conclusions. In these more promising studies some skeptics have maintained that the initial measurement of intellectual status was wrong and have elected to use the final higher score as the more accurate measure. However, there continues in such research the nagging conviction that Binet may have been right, that intelligence is a trainable function. The best available data lead us to conclude that significant changes in the quality of intellectual function are more likely to result to the extent that radical positive changes in environmental interactions occur before the consolidation of adolescence.

A contribution worthy of note in this area is that of Zigler, who attempts to account for changes in the quality of intellectual function on the basis of changes in the affective state (motivation, task involvement, etc.) He uses his data to support the conclusion that affective processes are more malleable than cognitive processes, and implies that changes in the affective area as well as concerted attention to the conative (skills development) area can result in limited

shifts in cognitive achievement. However, these changes are not viewed as shifts in the character of the basic cognitive-function, but rather as the products of motivation and/or skill development. Zigler's view of the stable character of the basic cognitive processes reflect the position advanced by Bloom, who argues that the processes underlying intellectual function rapidly lose their plasticity following about the third year of life. However, Bloom does not make it clear whether he views this stability as resulting from a rapidly reduced susceptibility to environmental influences or a heightened dependence upon earlier established patterns of stimulus-processing. Zigler's concern with the possible bi-modal distribution of intelligence, with greater representation of abstract processes of mentation in the higher modal score group and higher representation of concrete operations in the lower modal score group, may provide an adequate explanation for the stability both investigators refer to.

I will not discuss the manner in which these issues are further complicated by the nature/nuture controversy. Suffice it here to say that knowledge of the mechanisms of learning facility and dysfunction is very imprecise. Yet, these issues lie at the heart of the education process and urgently demand our attention.

A fourth problem area, possibly more a development problem than a research problem, but having elements of both -- is the implications of population diversity and pluralism for behavioral analysis and assessment. Increasingly we know that effective design and delivery of appropriate learning experiences must be based on an adequate awareness of the functional characteristics of the learner. We can document achieved status. We can determine rate of learning. We can predict academic achievement in traditional learning situations, but we are quite inept when it comes to analysis of learning process and absolutely ignorant when we turn to the analysis of the dynamic blending of status, rate, interests, style and temperament as dialectically interacting behavioral phenomena involved in learning success and failure.

In the face of the problem so conceived you will, I hope, forgive my impatience with the debate over population specific norms or the effort at the development of population specific tests or even culture fair tests, for that matter. The problem is not one of eliminating bias in testing, although there are advantages if we could achieve that, the problem is one of moving beyond normative approaches to the assessment of achieved learning status to criterion referenced approaches to the assessment of learning behavior and the behavioral processes which result in achieved learning status.

A fifth issue or problem (and then I must stop so as not to consume too much time) has to do with the context in which learning takes place and the purposes served by learning. For several years now, many of us have been trying to answer the question "Why do low status persons seem to benefit so much less from schooling than do high status persons?" We have blamed the children, we have blamed the schools, the teachers of these children, their parents, their motivation, their health, etc.

Ogbu argues that it is possible that perceived opportunity may be the culprit in school wastage. Wallace, by implication, makes the same point when he asserts that "...the purposes served by education are determined by the society that sponsors it.". Ogbu's work calls attention to the possibility that involvement in the tasks of schooling is modest when one perceives little opportunity in the broader society to benefit from such involvement. He reminds us that too many of our little brothers and sisters sense that the opportunity structure is less promising for them than for others and that this perception may dull their productivity. Thus, education, even good education, provided in a context which alienates, frustrates and demeans may lose its potential as a growth producing force.

Wallace has stated the case somewhat differently. It is his contention that the three

basic purposes of education are the development of technic, of morality and of intellect. By technic, he means the most conspicuous matter of learning, the "how to" skills; morality refers to the "what," at different stages of societal development it varies in meaning from correct behavior, to law and order, to humanistic concerns; intellect is "an establishment," a social tradition, an aspect of culture. Where the emphasis is placed with respect to purpose depends upon the phase of the given society at the time in question.

In the conservative society, greatest emphasis is placed upon training in technic or skills training, with morality (correct behavior) taking a secondary role and intellect being of least concern. Reactionary societies emphasize the importance of morality (law and order), with technic or skill training occupying second place and intellect receiving little or no attention. He sees society in the revolutionary phase as concentrating on the development of morality (humanistic concerns), with second-level interest given to the development of the intellect and the least attention being given to training in technic. These various differences in emphasis determine the focal points of the general education available within a given society, however, within each society, since the diverse sub-groups may be at differing phases of development, their educational objectives will be appropriate to their own phase rather than that of the society as a whole. The problem is whether there is congruence in purpose as perceived by a particular group with that of the society in general. In our present situation, blacks and other minorities are or should be concerned with radical change-revolution. Many of us want education to serve that purpose. Yet our general society is at least conservative - I think reactionary and its educational institutions serve conservative and reactionary purposes. Consequently, there is not congruence between the purposes of minority users of the system and its majority sponsors. School wastage then, may be a reflection of that incongruence.

The impact of incongruences between parts of a social system is not limited to the people who are served by the institutions of that social system. There are also fateful consequences for those of us who are the servants of those institutions. Most of us in this room are a part of the intellectual and professional classes. As intellectuals (pseudo or real) our role is marked by incongruences or contradiction.

Mao Tse-Tung has written a beautiful essay on Contradiction in which he reminded us that everything and everyone has its contradictions. Jean-Paul Sartre has discussed the paradox of contradiction as it applies to intellectuals. In the case of the intellectual, the contradiction arises from the nature of the role we play. In order to generate the ideas and knowledge expected, the intellectual must be immersed in the society and aware of the many currents of thought and experience in that society; however, in order to produce philosophical material, the intellectual must be able to dissociate himself in order to engage in the validative and synergistic processes. The difficulty, as usual, arises from trying to find a balance between these two aspects of the contradiction in order to be productive.

We are constantly struggling with the problems of involvement and separation - action and contemplation - applied and basic research. We have the constant tension which results from the press to join hands with our brothers and sisters in the political struggle and the need to maintain some sense of objectivity or to gain time for reflective deliberation. We are placed in positions of conflict of interest by the facts that the sources of support for our work are the same sources which support the society's instruments of our repression. Little wonder that we, like our younger brothers and sisters, find our productivity depressed by the contradictions or incongruences of the larger society in which we exist.

In this discussion I have stressed two areas of research concerning minorities; both are related to cognitive function, the assessment of cognitive status and the qualitative analysis of cognitive process. Obviously, there are other important areas of work under way and needed. I wish I could take the time to enumerate some of them and to exhort you to systematic attack upon them, however, let me conclude by reminding you that in pursuit of these problems, being black is not enough. In fact, it may even be irrelevant, except that sensitivity to the problem and its context is an aspect of competence; then again, even being competent may not be enough. Excellence, at least in some of us, may be essential. We have not replaced DuBois; we do not have a new Fanon. Who among us is as productive as was Frazier or Johnson? Who can fill the shoes of Ernest E. Just or Alaine Locke or Leo Hansberry?

Polemic is important, but excellence of scholarship is also essential. I leave you with these thoughts and the hope that, as an interested group, we can begin to effect greater changes in areas which are presently lacking.